copy on DAT but, unluckily, he'd left it in a hire car in the US. On his return to the UK, he heard about the fire and miraculously managed to get the tape back from *Alamo*. Even with that calamity averted, *Waterpistol* only limped out in 1995, by which time the needle and the damage had been done – the group had splintered and Head was heavily into heroin.

"Somebody said to me the other week about *Waterpistol*," says Head, "'Your head must have been done in after that.' But I'm not a dweller – even in the bad times, the dark times, the excesses, it was still not pressurised, because you're in a different state of consciousness anyway, so you don't give a fuck."

After Shack's split, the Head brothers reconvened as Michael Head & The Strands to record *The Magical World Of The Strands*, funded by French fan Stéphane Bismuth. Although Head was deep into narcotics and flitting between Liverpool and Paris, the album is most likely his masterpiece, channeling the eeriness of *Forever Changes* and the ornate folk-jazz of Pentangle. Made over a protracted period, only when the money was available, its creation is surprisingly similar to that of *Adiós Señor Pussycat*.

"We didn't actually think anyone was gonna listen to the Strands album," says Head. "So there was no pressure, working through the night on a shoestring in downtime, writing songs as we were going along."

"It's my favourite," says John Head. "We found an essence that we tried our best to keep hold of all the way through recording, and I think we managed to do it. Because we didn't have a record company we didn't get that sort of pressure... Steve Powell was great, he was very flexible with the studio time – I think he only got paid a few months ago!"

"Recording is a very simple process," laughs Powell. "There's no magic about it, really. Having the songs is the trick! Mick does have some quite firm ideas, but he has a flexible attitude as well – it's all about what the song is asking for as it's growing."

With the album eventually released in 1997, it seemed a good time for the Head brothers to capture the public's imagination again. But with Shack reignited, signed to London Records and hyped on the cover of *NME* ("our greatest songwriter"), the Youth-produced *HMS Fable*, a perfect album for the post-Britpop years, once again failed to fulfil expectations. "I wish it had sold millions," says Michael Head, "because we were all in the zone."

"I don't think anyone likes people to start blowing your trumpet before you've got your trumpet out of its box," says John Head. "That was kind of what was going on. The record could have been finished in two months, but it took nearly two years. And when Youth got involved, a lot of the songs became a lot more anthemic, which I wasn't necessarily into. Then all anyone wanted to talk about was drugs anyway, so it was quite disappointing."

Head, now in happier times...

"I feel like I've been in the freezer for 30 years..."

MICK HEAD

The album did spawn a few of Michael Head's greatest songs, however, including "Comedy" and "Streets Of Kenny", a shanty-like hymn to Kensington, the inner-city area of Liverpool where the brothers grew up. The mood seems elegiac and wistful – *"Searching through the streets again/Through the streets of Kenny"* – until it's revealed that *"the boys"* Head is searching for are dealers who can get him *"a big... bag"*.

"I've got one or two blue-nosed mates who reckon people from Kenny are unhinged," laughs Head. "I take that as a compliment, to tell you the truth. We're just different!"

Shack made two more excellent albums in the 2000s – *Here's Tom With The Weather* in 2003, and *...The Corner Of Miles And Gil* in 2006 – the latter the final album Michael Head would release until *Adiós Señor Pussycat*.

"I didn't wanna do an album in a million years," he explains of his wilderness years. "I was five-stone heavier, didn't wanna leave the house. I was in a bad way."

Neither brother rules out a return for Shack, however. "I love playing with Mick," explains John, "and I always will. That never goes away. We've literally been playing together since we were kids... you don't have to think, it just comes out."

JOHN JOHNSON

"EVER since I was a kid, Hollywood has fascinated me," says Michael Head, once he and *Uncut* are tucked away in the Florrie, a Dingle community centre the songwriter has heavily supported, performing benefits and raising awareness. "That whole Laurel Canyon thing, right up to Sharon Tate. I got robbed once, and the only thing they robbed was [*Kenneth Anger's book*] *Hollywood Babylon*, because it was a rarity. CD player? Nah! DVD player? Not bothered. *Hollywood Babylon*? Yeah. Cultural thieves! I was gutted."

Head is already planning two new albums – one based around the piano, the other with the Red Elastic Band – along with a set of short stories, plays and some screenwriting. "Ultimately, I wanna fuckin' conquer Hollywood! But I'm gonna start with these short stories – one's called 'Tosshead', which is about growing up with the surname Head. I really love it, it's good.

"The next album's going to be completely different. There's a lot of farewell in the lyrics on this album, a lot of kismet, and it's good to get it out of my system so I can move on personally, and creatively as well. Steve asked me what my plans were, when we finished this album. I said, 'Well, you know, get back into heroin, go to France, live there for six months, come back, detox, make an album...' He knew I was messing with him, but there was a bit of truth in that – 'ey, not the heroin bit – but going away for a bit, getting a bit more experience."

In a taxi from the Florrie back to the centre of Liverpool, Head and the driver get chatting. "So what do you do, then?" the driver eventually asks. "I write songs and sing them," says Head. When the driver asks what kind of places this singer-songwriter plays, Head is evasive, even when the car passes right by St George's Hall, where he's performed so many times.

Out of the car, Head shrugs off the incident, observing that he's learnt to keep his name out of those kind of conversations. "They either think I'm taking the piss, or they're my biggest fan," he laughs.

It's this modesty that has perhaps kept Head going. He's shaken off the ghosts of his past and, instead, his life is all about serving the songs. This is no tortured soul in recovery, either: "Bit of a twat of a question," he asks *Uncut* at one point, "but... Top 3 films?" Each answer is met with an enthusiastic, "Boss!"

Mick Head in 2013: the alcohol years

"I'm really excited about the future. I'm only just starting..."

MICK HEAD

"Do I wish I was bigger? What is 'bigger'?" he says as we prepare to part, Head on his way for dinner with his girlfriend. "Does that mean being in more magazines, more money? More hassle? I'm not big on material things. I make do. Obviously, I'd like the Red Elastic Band to make money so I can have a safety net for my family. I had nowhere to live last year, so I'm happy with the way that's turned around. I'm happy in my own mind, I'm happy with my personal life, and with the music.

"No disrespect to some of the old songs," he says, "but with some of them I was going through the motions, wanting to finish them as best I could at that time. Now, with *Adiós Señor Pussycat*, I'm in a position to put into fruition the things that I've wanted to do. I'm really excited about the future."

There's a glint in his eye.

"I'm only just starting, mate."

Adiós Señor Pussycat is released on October 20 by Violette Records

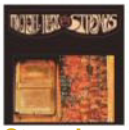
DIAMONDS IN THE DIRT

Head In The Clouds

The best albums of Michael Head's career

THE PALE FOUNTAINS
From Across The Kitchen Table
VIRGIN, 1985
An airy, joyous alternative to the saccharine synth-pop of the mid-'80s, the Paleys' second album boasts some early Head classics such as "Jean's Not Happening" and the title track. **6/10**

SHACK
Waterpistol
MARINA, 1995
The band's confident, expansive second album would have been blowing minds in 1991, and still sounds strong today. Highlights include the psychedelic swing of "Stranger" and the hazy waltz of "Time Machine". **8/10**



MICHAEL HEAD & THE STRANDS
The Magical World Of The Strands MEGAPHONE, 1997
Perhaps Head's greatest set of songs, the Strands' sole album is as magical as its title suggests, from the tender "Queen Matilda" to "And Luna", a tribute to Arthur Lee. **9/10**

SHACK
HMS Fable
LONDON, 1999
The production can be a bit post-Oasis, but Shack's third contains prime Head cuts – the raucous "Natalie's Party", the submarine "Captain's Table" and the beautifully grimy "Streets Of Kenny". **8/10**

SHACK
Here's Tom With The Weather
NORTH COUNTRY, 2003
John Head's favourite Shack album, the band's penultimate release to date is one of their prettiest, from the polite groove of "On The Terrace" to the sublime shuffle of "Byrds Turn To Stone": *"We spent the time/Blowing our minds..."* **8/10**

MICHAEL HEAD & THE RED ELASTIC BAND
Adiós Señor Pussycat VIOLETTE, 2017
Coming 11 years after the last Shack LP, Head's new album is proof that inspiration is still in full flow: the baroque-pop "Overjoyed", "4+4 Still Makes 8" and "Josephine" would fit well on any of his best records. **8/10**